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ABSTRACT

The theory of conventional metaphor, as developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) is briefly recapitulated. The implications of this theory for teaching English for Specific Purposes are outlined. Chief among these cannot be accurately understood if the metaphorical chaining is not retracted; and (2) the ability of metaphor to add lexis that is not normally thought of as pertaining to the field in question. A plea is made for a field-by-field study of the role of metaphor in ESP texts. (Author/JL)

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Metaphor and ESP: a ghost in the machine?

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Abstract

The theory of 'conventional metaphor', as developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), is briefly recapitulated. Its implications for ESP are outlined. Chief among these are (1) the possibility that lexis used metaphorically cannot be at all accurately understood if the metaphorical chaining is not retraced and (2) the ability of metaphor to add lexis which is not normally thought of as pertaining to the field in question. A plea is made for field-by-field study of the role of metaphor in ESP texts.

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Metaphor and ESP: a ghost in the machine?

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'Paene omnium metaphorum est' (a classical view)

1.0 Metaphor: a preliminary definition

Lakoff and Johnson, in their seminal work Metaphors We Live By (1980) use 'metaphor' to refer to any case where a lexical item is carried over from use in the expression of one concept to use in the expression of another (so also in Eco 1982, and others). Thus, 'metaphor' comprises a range of sub-types including such classical 'figures' of speech as metonymy (e.g., scepter for 'authority'), synechdoche (part for whole or vice versa) and simile.

As part of the revival of interest in semantics generally, there has been, in general and psycholinguistics, a scattered growth of concern with metaphor. This is not yet much in evidence in TESOL, however — nor even in English language applied linguistics (but see Low 1988; for works relevant to lexicograpy see Ayto 1989, Nuccorini 1989 and Lindstromberg 1989). This revival has been stimulated by the development of the notion of 'conventional' metaphor — that is, metaphor which is not poetical, not 'imaginative and creative' (Lakoff and Johnson), nor even 'innovative' (Low 1988).

The following excerpts contain a number of metaphors of varying degrees of conventionality, just some of which are underlined:

(1) "The stock market managed to avert another bloodbath — but it was a close run thing. There had been fears Nigel Lawson's resignation as Chancellor would provoke an avalanche of overseas selling. In the event a dramatic defensive pre-trading markdown by

market makers, which in theory wiped some 90 points off the FT-SE share index, prompted would-be sellers to have second thoughts.

All the market needed to almost eliminate the blues was a firm Wall Street opening. In the event New York turned in yet another depressing performance and the market had to run for cover again." (The Independent (London), 28.10.1989, p. 20, 'Market Report', by Derek Pain.)

(2) 'Intrusion of chlorine or hydrogen upsets the natural balance. Small amounts of these (of the order of parts per billion) released by CFCs have a catalytic effect that breaks down stratospheric ozone.'

(Sprent, Peter. 1988. Taking Risks: the Science of Probablity. Harmondsworth: Penguin. P. 153.)

(3) 'If there is already a text stored with this name, the message "New text name!" will not appear. Press EXIT to abort the procedure and return to step 1.' (ETV 260 User Manual, p. 3/9. 1986. Ivrea: Olivetti.)

True, some of these metaphors are either so conventional or easy to grasp the sense of that they are easily overlooked, for example, in in in the event. But this is a metaphor since an event simply is not a thing that something can really be in. Something can be in a box or a pocket. But nothing can be in an event except in a figurative, i.e., metaphorical sense (Quirk et al. 1972 and 1985 are among the authorities noting that such uses are metaphorical.)

Or consider turned in: The market definitely did not literally turn, whatever market may be taken to mean here. Nor, by the end of the process which turn is used to characterize, was the market literally in anything that it wasn't in before.

2.0 Metaphors and 'lexical bars'

Anyone who knows some Latin could underline a dozen or so other words in the examples above, for example, event (ex + venire, cf. outcome). Of course, for the Latinless these metaphors are closed, or 'dead'. Corson (1985) refines the argument of Grove (1949) that the superabundance in English of such foreign language (largely Greek and Latin) metaphors bars the way of many native-speaking children and adults to full command of their own language and thereby closes off numerous opportunities, not least, economic ones.

In the context of TESOL in general, this 'lexical bar' theory has interesting implications in respect not only of loan-word metaphors but of non-borrowed, or 'intra-English' ones (such as phrasal verbs). For example, Romance-speaking learners would seem to face a lexical bar to the extent that non-borrowed, Anglo-Saxon derived metaphors (e.g., phrasal verbs) remain closed, while non-Romance-speaking learners, especially non-Germanic-speaking ones, would seem to face a double lexical bar. I can see no obvious reason why ESP should be excluded from these observations.

Corson, who is concerned with native-speakers, cites well-publicized studies which clearly suggest that the lexical bar can be substantially dismantled if the meanings of the common elements

of Latinate vocabulary are taught. Of course, one especially successful method, enrolling students in Latin courses, is hardly an option in TESOL, let alone ESP.

3.0 Metaphor in TESOL

Even twenty years ago the general literature on metaphor was gigantic. Shibles (1971) lists approximately 3,000 titles on the subject. But Eco (1982:87) is able to note whole categories of important studies omitted from this tally.

In the literature of TESOL, the situation is very different, however:

(a) I am certain that I have never come across a coursebook that deals with metaphor in a systematic fashion.

(b) As for the grammar handbooks, none of the following has an entry for 'metaphor': Alexander (1987), Allsop (1983), Jesperson (1976), Leech (1989), Leech and Svartvik (1975), Quirk et al. (1972 and 1985), Swan (1980), and Thomsen and Martinet (1969). Quirk et al. (1972:315-16 and 1985:674) do note that prepositions are frequently used metaphorically but otherwise metaphor is mentioned rather than discussed.

(c) Of the teacher's resource books on vocabulary teaching which I have looked at (e.g., Wallace 1982, and Gairns and Redmond 1986), none deal with metaphor.

(d) Of the background books, Carter and McCarthy (1987) include one article (Nattinger) that briefly touches on a single aspect of the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) while Tinkel (1988) has an entry for 'figurative extensions of sense' with a few examples but no discussion.

(e) The published syllabuses of the (British) Royal Society of Arts/University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate courses leading to the Certificate and Diploma in TEFL (Adults) do not include mention of metaphor.

(f) The user's guides to English language learner's dictionaries also say nothing about metaphor.

(g) Moving a bit further up the ladder, David Crystal's A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics (1978, revised 1985) demonstrates the state of interest in metaphor in mainstream English language linguistics -- it has nothing on the subject.

Why the silence?

The established view in TESOL is that metaphor is a feature of poetry and somewhat extravagant prose, hence the topic has fallen into the exclusive purview of literature.

This tunnel vision doubtless stems from the notorious fact that for most of this century one of TESOL'S main feeder-fields, English language (not Continental) linguistics, has been utterly bedazzled by questions of form. Metaphor, however, is a quintessential matter of semantics.

Although more attention is paid to semantics during the last few years, the prevalent interest in discourse meaning has probably taken over from structural linguistics (including, the Chomskyean variety) as a discouragement to the study of metaphor. This is because it fosters a view of word meaning -- well-exemplified in the highly segmented entries in the Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (1987) -- according to which context is a deep-reaching determinant of word meaning.

Admitting the existence of conventional metaphor, however, must eventually lead to skepticism about this proposition for, in light of the notion of conventional metaphor, it soon becomes plain that words are not typically polysemic. That is, a word used metaphorically by no means sheds its original meaning to take on a radically different one according to the new context.

As it happens, it is easy to demonstrate that the meaning of a context is more likely to change through the substitution into it of different words than vice versa. Take any short passage, pick a word, start substituting in words of the same class, and see what happens. The fact that most of what results is gibberish is a good indication that the power of context to alter word meaning has its limits. The fact that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve absolute synonymy suggests that these limits are very narrow indeed.

It has even been argued, for example, that even such allegedly highly polysemic words as prepositions (Lakoff 1982) and 'primary verbs' -- e.g., take, turn, hit, get, etc. (Ruhl 1975 and 1979, and Lindstromberg, forthcoming) -- have clear prototypical meanings whose metaphorical extensions group into close-linked chains.

4.0 How conventional metaphors arise

Lyons (1977:263-64), citing the work of linguists from a few generations back (M. Bréal and W. Porzig), sketches a theory of how word meanings are extended over time by the processes of 'generalization' and 'abstraction'.

Though Lyons is not clear about this, both processes involve metaphor. In the case of generalization, the metaphorical leap is

from the concrete to the concrete. In the case of abastraction, it is from the concrete to the abstract.

One of Lyons' examples (for generalization) can be put as follows: Take the verb ride as having originally had the meaning "[perform] the activity of managing a horse whilst one is seated upon and being conveyed by it" (p. 263). When the bicycle was invented, and a word was needed for what one typically does with or on bicycles -- instead of coining a word, borrowing a word, or using a paraphrase -- a word was carried over from its original use, and that word was ride.

The motivation for this metaphor was presumably the fact that there are obvious similarities between riding a horse and riding a bicycle, namely, "being in control", "being conveyed", and "being in a certain posture" (p. 263). It was not necessarily inevitable, though, that just this metaphor should arise. For example, German has a verb for 'ride' as in ride a horse, namely, reiten. But it was not adopted to signify what people do on bicycles; some other verb was instead. Other English verbs that might have been used would seem to include pilot, steer, power, drive, and pedal. Lakoff and Johnson stress that different choices of word in such a case yield different conceptualizations, ones that typically persist and shape our view of the reality long after the metaphor was first coined.

An example of abstraction is ride a market trend. Here, the elements of meaning that are only appropriate in the case of animals or physical objects have receded, but something still remains of the mental image these elements can engender. Hence the vividness of ride a market trend as opposed to follow a market

trend. That is, although rather conventionalized, the metaphor is not dead. A sign of this is the fact that, it figures in a general metaphor, or 'metaphor set' (Nattinger 1988), which we can label 'the stock market as a dangerous beast' (which can 'bullish' or 'bearish', 'leave a trail of havoc', etc.). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) is replete with examples of general metaphors of all kinds. They point out, as well, that the argument that it is polysemy not metaphor that allows this or that word to be used in radically different contexts fails to account for the existence of metaphors in thematic sets.

5.0 Idiom and metaphor

In TESOL circles the metaphors that get noticed -- because they stick out like sore thumbs -- are generally called idioms. Considering the relationship between the notions of idiom and metaphor has interesting results:

5.1 Opacity

Among the defining features of an idiom is that its constituents give no clue whatever to its overall meaning. It cannot be analyzed, or 'seen into'. One usually thinks of phrases in this connection and the classic example is kick the bucket. Actually, few so-called idioms satisfy this condition as well as kick the bucket does. Ones that do have been called 'opaque' (e.g., Palmer 1987:216-17). However, it seems certain that whoever first used kick the bucket to mean 'die' must have expected to be understood. I cannot think how this phrase could have been understood as 'die' unless it was a metaphor that people at that time could understand

in terms of its parts. Any who would maintain that this idiom may always have been opaque are obliged, I think, themselves to come up with an explanation of how an idiom can become established if is opaque right from the start.

5.2 Translucency

The vast majority of idioms might well be described as 'translucent'. That is, they have meanings which are difficult for learners to guess but which teachers, for example, can help them to see as deriving from the literal, or prototypical, meaning of each constituent in an unexceptional, if metaphorical, way (cf. Klima and Bellugi's study of the comprehensibility to non-signers of gestures in a sign language, 1979:24).

5.3 Transparency

The designation 'transparent', is reserved for lexemes with meanings that can be easily guessed (e.g., Palmer 1987:217,227). In my view, none of these can be considered idioms. But there are transparent metaphors (e.g., in the event and the root of the problem). This is where teachers may get tangled up, for I have often heard teachers refer to examples like the root of the problem as idioms.

6.0 Teaching metaphor

Transparent metaphors, by definition, do not require teaching (though what is transparent to some is not to others).

Opaque, or dead, metaphors — as has often been remarked — must be taught in a one-by-one, non-analytic fashion, like single

morpheme words. However, my observation of scores of general English language classes suggests that most translucent metaphors are currently dealt with as if they were opaque. The pressures in this direction in ESP teaching situations must be especially strong. The treatment of vocabulary in ESP coursebooks does not suggest otherwise.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Lakoff (1982), and Low (1988), although only Low is specifically concerned with language teaching, offer the teacher, the ESP teacher included, a fund of generative ideas on how to render metaphors translucent.

7.0 Implications for ESP

Lakoff and Johnson state:

> "We feel that no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis." (1980:19)

In my view this really puts the fat in the fire as far as ESP is concerned — once, that is, it is agreed that metaphor ESP texts include metaphors. What Lakoff and Johnson are saying here is simply this: no term used metaphorically can be accurately comprehended until the metaphorical chaining has been traced back to its starting point — namely, the psychologically primary application of that term to a particular type or domain of physical experience. For example, to understand bloodbath in excerpt (1) above, it is necessary to know the literal meanings of both blood and bath for the general metaphor 'business is war' to be appreciated (note also on the defensive and run for cover as well

as, later on in the same article, in retreat and marauders).

Clearly, retracing the metaphorical chains would entail an approach to vocabulary teaching that is almost certainly resorted to rather exceptionally in TESOL generally, let alone ESP where aims are narrow and time is short. True, teaching blood and bath is not difficult, but some other metaphorical chains are longer and take more time to follow to their end, for example:

(4) ride a market trend -->ride a horse.

(5) turn out a product depends on-->turn = 'turn in a certain direction' (i.e, out)-->'direct out'-->'send out'; also involved, probably, is the image of a factory as a place with turning wheels, gears and conveyor belts, thus, there may be an element of metonymy.

so,

turn in a performance--->'direct not outward but inward', i.e, 'not for remote consumers but for one's (or an institution and its participants') own benefit)'

Such a highly congitive approach depends on learners having a clear understanding of the prototypical meanings of such high frequency yet troublesome vocabulary as primary verbs and prepositions. Yet this, in turn, depends on a solid foundation of general English. More problematic, however, is the fact that metaphor drags all kinds of words seemingly extraneous words into field specific texts. Business and sports texts may be the most mixed in this regard, but the messiness is probably general.

It seems to me that the most conservative conclusion to draw from this is that some enlargement of concern is overdue within

ESP. For example: ESP specialists need to determine densities of metaphor in texts typical for the disciplines they are involved with. Common metaphor sets should be identified and suitable teaching procedures designed. The relation between literal (i.e., generally spatial) senses of prepositions and their metaphorical extensions should recieve more attention in teaching. Finally, notions of what vocabulary is or is not of likely relevance in a given field need re-examination, and, if it is found for this or that branch of business or science that metaphors introduce a relatively large number of ostensibly extraneous vocabulary, ways of managing the necessary additional vocabulary learning need to be designed. Not least in importance here is adequate explanation of the usefulness of non-field specific vocabulary to any learners whose motivation is very narrowly instrumental. I have found that adverting learners to common metaphor sets is a good way of going about this.

Note

I am indebted to Graham Low for bringing Lakoff (1982) to my attention.

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